

## Were the National Socialists a *Völkisch* Party? Paganism, Christianity, and the Nazi Christmas

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A trend in studies about National Socialism and religion in recent years argues for a deliberate distinction between the Nazi Party (NSDAP) and the antisemitic *völkisch* movement of nineteenth-century Germany. This article challenges that contention. Several researchers have published comprehensive studies on the heterogeneous nature of Christian responses to the Nazis, but a comparable approach looking at how the Nazis viewed religion has not yet been undertaken.<sup>1</sup> A study of the latter type is certainly necessary, given that one of the consistent features of the *völkisch* movement was its diversity. As Roger Griffin has argued, a “striking feature of the sub-culture . . . was just how prolific and variegated it was . . . [T]he only denominator common to all was the myth of national rebirth.”<sup>2</sup> In short, the *völkisch* movement contained a colorful, varied, and often bewildering range of religious beliefs.

A number of historians have suggested that the leaders of the NSDAP adhered either to paganism or to an “Aryanized” Christian faith. Uwe Puschner has noted that two major “religious concepts and camps” existed in the *völkisch* movement beginning around 1900. One camp advocated an “Aryanized” German-Christianity, the other a “revival of the pre-Christian religion of the ancient Germans.” Yet Puschner argues, at the same time, that “*völkisch* schemes of religion” formed a spectrum: from attempts “to germanize Christianity, to a decisive rejection of Christianity and the creation of new Germanic religions.” This meant that “there were efforts to attempt to account for Christian religious convictions in the Germanic world of faith, and to fuse Christianity with

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<sup>1</sup>For the “particularist” or “heterogenous” nature of Protestant experience, see Manfred Gailus, *Protestantismus und Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Durchdringung des protestantischen Sozialmilieus in Berlin* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2001); Kyle Jantzen, *Faith and Fatherland: Parish Politics in Hitler's Germany* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991), 87–88. As he notes, the term *völkisch* generally meant “integral and racist nationalism.” See also George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 3–9; George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 285–88.

(constructed) Germanic religious ideas, in which Jesus Christ was roughly equated with Baldur or Odin.”<sup>3</sup> All of this suggests a view of paganism and Christianity as part of a single continuum.

There has been little consideration of the comparable range of religious views in the early Nazi Party. The prevailing approach can be attributed, in part, to growing efforts to understand the Nazi Party as a movement that adhered to a particular form of Christian faith, a “positive Christianity” that amounted to an Aryanized form of faith.<sup>4</sup> Point 24 of the Party Program adopted on February 24, 1920 stated that “the party as such stands for a positive Christianity”—after noting that it would only support religious confessions as long as they did not “offend the ethical or moral feelings of the Germanic race.”<sup>5</sup>

Much debate in recent years has revolved around the question of whether “positive Christianity” was included for political ends—or intended instead to designate the Nazis as a Christian party, thus demarcating them from other völkisch groups.<sup>6</sup> Two articles appeared in this journal a decade ago on this very topic. The first—a piece by Richard Steigmann-Gall that asked, “How Anti-Christian Were the ‘Pagans’” in the Nazi Party?—suggested that the time was ripe for a reassessment of the field. In a similar vein, Derek Hastings addressed assumptions about anti-Catholicism among the Nazis. The present article re-thinks these issues by pinpointing some of the “exact intellectual antecedents” for early—and prominent—Nazi views on religion.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Uwe Puschner, “Weltanschauung und Religion, Religion und Weltanschauung. Ideologie und Formen völkischer Religion,” *Zeitenblicke* 5, no. 1 (2006): 11. On “Christ [transformed] into the Germanic sun god,” see Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*, 72.

<sup>4</sup>See Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14–15.

<sup>5</sup>See the program published in the *Völkischer Beobachter* (hereafter cited as VB) 45 (May 15, 1920).

<sup>6</sup>See the special issue “Nazis, Christianity and Political Religion: A Debate” in the *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 1 (January 2007). More generally on national-religious trends, see George S. Williamson, “A Religious Sonderweg? Reflections on the Sacred and the Secular in the Historiography of Modern Germany,” *Church History* 75, no. 1 (2006): 139–56; Manfred Gailus and Armin Nolzen, eds., *Zerstrittene “Volksgemeinschaft.” Glaube, Konfession und Religion im Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); Wolfgang Altgeld, *Katholizismus, Protestantismus, Judentum. Über religiös begründete Gegensätze und nationalreligiöse Ideen in der Geschichte des deutschen Nationalismus* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1992); Manfred Gailus and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Nationalprotestantische Mentalitäten. Konturen, Entwicklungslinien und Umbrüche eines Weltbildes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>Richard Steigmann-Gall, “Rethinking Nazism and Religion: How Anti-Christian Were the ‘Pagans’?,” *Central European History* 36, no. 1 (2003): 104; Derek Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement? Religion, Race and Culture in Munich, 1919–1923,” *Central European History* 36, no. 3 (2003): 383–87. Searching for the intellectual roots of Nazism has become an important part of the literature in recent years: see Derek Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism: Religious Identity and National Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Michael Kellogg, *The Russian Roots of Nazism: White Émigrés and the Making of National Socialism, 1917–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Steigmann-Gall posited a dichotomy in religious terms: he noted “the contested nature of religious meaning in the [Nazi] movement,” but argued that the battle lines had been drawn between neo-pagans and those who advocated an Aryan Christianity—referring to these respective groups as “paganists” and “positive Christians.”<sup>8</sup> Although Steigmann-Gall agreed that the neo-pagans were a part of the Nazi Party, he questioned the extent to which they were truly anti-Christian.<sup>9</sup> This article contends that the notion of a dichotomy does not capture the breadth of religious belief in the early Nazi Party.

Steigmann-Gall also believes that, in its early years from 1919 to 1923, the Nazi Party had “little need to tone down its message for the sake of public relations,” and that “there was nothing to be lost in a frank expression of the movement’s ideology.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, his work was limited mainly to the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, Derek Hastings deals specifically with the question of religion in the early period of the Nazi movement. He proposed that there had been a “distinct Catholic-völkisch orientation” in the early years, and that the Nazis had opposed “political Catholicism” but not “religious Catholicism.”<sup>12</sup> Hastings has provided a great deal of evidence demonstrating that there were Catholics who believed Nazism and Catholicism were entirely compatible, and that some of those who had propagandized for the party in the early years were even Catholic clergy.<sup>13</sup> But he also argues that the Nazis explicitly sought to dissociate themselves from “Germanic racial and religious ideas”—specifically from those of two major völkisch figures, Theodor Fritsch and Artur Dinter.<sup>14</sup> This raises the question: should the early NSDAP still be seen as a völkisch party?

This article contends that the Nazis were clearly a part of the völkisch movement, that they reflected the movement’s diverse religious trends, and that there is an urgent need for historians to reconnect the Nazi Party to the milieu from

<sup>8</sup>Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 12; on the dichotomy between “paganists” and “positive Christians,” see, e.g., 86–87, 261–63. Steigmann-Gall uses the term *paganists* because he argues that paganism was not a “coherent religious system” (xv). The notion of “positive Christianity” as a “religious system” also lacks coherence; see Samuel Koehne, “Reassessing *The Holy Reich*: Leading Nazis’ Views on Confession, Community and ‘Jewish’ Materialism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 3 (2013): 423–45.

<sup>9</sup>Steigmann-Gall, “Rethinking Nazism and Religion”; cf. Irving Hexham, “Inventing ‘Paganists’: A Close Reading of Richard Steigmann-Gall’s *The Holy Reich*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 1 (January 2007): 59–78.

<sup>10</sup>Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 13–14.

<sup>11</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 8. Doris Bergen argues that “Steigmann-Gall’s analysis rarely extends past 1937”; see her piece “Nazism and Christianity: Partners and Rivals? A Response to Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 1 (2007): 31.

<sup>12</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 72.

<sup>13</sup>See also Kevin P. Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 73, 104–6.

which it emerged.<sup>15</sup> Major histories of the Nazis consistently note that they came from a broader völkisch subculture, and historians have examined the role played in this respect by antisemitism, eugenics, and Social Darwinism.<sup>16</sup> Race and an extreme racialized form of antisemitism were certainly prominent in the Nazis' views on religion. But there is a need for a deeper analysis of the intellectual roots of National Socialism with respect to its religious beliefs—and to how those beliefs connected with earlier völkisch religious trends. This article challenges the conclusions of recent studies that have misinterpreted some of the key evidence. In fact, as we shall see, “positive Christianity” meant little to the Nazi Party at the very same time it was proclaimed to be a part of their Program.

The following arguments derive from two streams of inquiry: How did leading members of the party express their views on religion in the months immediately following the official declaration of support for “positive Christianity”? And how did the Nazis depict their public celebrations of religious festivals in the early years of the movement? These are essential questions that have not yet been fully answered.<sup>17</sup> The article examines, in particular, the views of those Nazis who were most prominent at the gathering of the German Workers' Party (Deutsche Arbeiterpartei or DAP, which later became the NSDAP) on February 24, 1920, when the Program was first promulgated. With respect to religious festivals, the article focuses primarily on Nazi Christmas celebrations from 1920 to 1922. There was no Christmas celebration in 1923 because of the failed Munich Putsch.

As we shall see, neither paganism nor the esoteric was excluded from the NSDAP in its early years, despite its nominal advocacy of “positive Christianity”; furthermore, claims about a fundamental division between paganism and Christianity—either in the völkisch movement or in the Nazi Party of the early 1920s—establish a false dichotomy. This article considers these early years for three specific reasons. In the first place, as Hastings has pointed out, “the earliest years of the Nazi movement in Munich have received startlingly little direct

<sup>15</sup>Though we differ in our interpretations, Eric Kurlander and I are pursuing similar ends in this regard; see Eric Kurlander, “Hitler's Monsters: The Occult Roots of Nazism and the Emergence of the Nazi ‘Supernatural Imaginary,’” *German History* 30, no. 4 (2012): 528–49.

<sup>16</sup>See Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: Penguin, 2004), 22–51, 159–60; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 1998), 49–52, 76–89; Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919–1945: A Documentary Reader*, vol. 1 (*The Rise to Power, 1919–1934*) (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1983), 1–10.

<sup>17</sup>Though celebrations of solstice and Christmas in the early years have not been thoroughly examined, Esther Gajek and Joe Perry have published important studies on Nazi views of Christmas, particularly after 1933; see Esther Gajek, “Christmas under the Third Reich,” *Anthropology Today* 6, no. 4 (1990): 3–9; Richard Faber and Esther Gajek, eds., *Politische Weihnachten in Antike und Moderne. Zur ideologischen Durchdringung des Fests der Feste* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997); Joe Perry, “Nazifying Christmas: Political Culture and Popular Celebration in the Third Reich,” *Central European History* 38, no. 4 (2005): 572–605; Joe Perry, *Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 189–238.

treatment.”<sup>18</sup> Second, the period from 1920 to 1923 was a distinct era in the life of the Nazi Party, an era during which it transformed itself from a small and obscure organization—which Adolf Hitler described as a “tea club”—into a revolutionary movement.<sup>19</sup> Third, this was a period in which the Nazis were closely connected to their roots in the *völkisch* movement and more open about their own concepts and ideology.

### The *Völkisch* World of Thought

The early Nazis drew on a *völkisch* literature that was certainly eclectic, but that generally adhered to racism and antisemitism.<sup>20</sup> Those involved in the *völkisch* movement generally sought a “racially specific” religion that was “appropriate” for Germans. As George S. Williamson has pointed out, many *völkisch* groups shared a desire for “the revival of a specifically ‘Germanic’ religiosity.”<sup>21</sup> A brief introduction to the religious views of some of the major authors in this movement sheds light on the issue of continuity with Nazism.

One of the most prominent *völkisch* writers at the time was Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who had become one of Hitler’s heroes long before they finally met in September 1923.<sup>22</sup> In *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899), Chamberlain described the supposedly “religious instincts of race.” In his view, these were “in-born religious tendencies,” though he also used the term “racial soul.”<sup>23</sup> He contended that “Aryans” possessed certain instincts that led them to spiritual searching, whereas “Semites”—particularly “the Jews”—lacked such religious instinct because they were materialists.<sup>24</sup> This led Chamberlain

<sup>18</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 5.

<sup>19</sup>Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1936), 241, 378.

<sup>20</sup>This summary is not intended to be exhaustive. *Völkisch* thought has its own extensive literature. See Hubert Cancik and Uwe Puschner, *Antisemitismus, Paganismus, völkische Religion* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2004); Uwe Puschner, *Die völkische Bewegung im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich. Sprache–Rasse–Religion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001); Uwe Puschner, Walter Schmitz, and Justus H. Ulbricht, eds., *Handbuch zur “Völkischen Bewegung,” 1871–1918* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1996); Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology—The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890–1935* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Uwe Puschner and Clemens Vollnhals, eds., *Die völkisch-religiöse Bewegung im Nationalsozialismus. Eine Beziehungs- und Konfliktgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

<sup>21</sup>Williamson, *The Longing for Myth*, 286; Stefanie von Schnurbein and Justus H. Ulbricht, *Völkische Religion und Krisen der Moderne. Entwürfe “arteigener” Glaubenssysteme seit der Jahrhundertwende* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001).

<sup>22</sup>Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936*, 151, 660n116.

<sup>23</sup>Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century: A Translation from the German by John Lees*, vol. 2 (London: J. Lane, 1911), 108–12. He described racially delineated “tendencies of mind” as “the racial soul” (193). See also Geoffrey G. Field, *Evangelist of Race: The Germanic Vision of Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>24</sup>Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, 1, 120–21, 214–17, 225, 234. See the discussion of Jews as “materialists” possessing a “minimum of religion” and a “poverty of [religious] imagination” (pp. 411–23).

to argue that Christianity blended “alien elements” and was engaged in a kind of racial struggle: “Reduced to its simplest expression, this strife was a struggle for mastery between Indo-European and Jewish religious instincts.”<sup>25</sup> He even argued that the Jews had experienced a spiritual “arrested development,” though all “branches of the Semitic stem” were “always astonishingly poor in religious instinct.”<sup>26</sup>

Another influential writer was the notorious antisemite Theodor Fritsch, who attacked the “false god” Yahweh.<sup>27</sup> Relying on the notion that the Israelites and the Jews were “two racially different peoples,” Fritsch argued in *The False God* (1911) that the books of the biblical Prophets were the “antisemitic writings of antiquity.”<sup>28</sup> Such themes were taken up by Artur Dinter, a successful völkisch novelist whose best-selling work *Sin against the Blood* (1917) was regularly promoted in the Nazis’ official newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*.<sup>29</sup> Lauding Chamberlain, Dinter argued that the idea “Race is everything!” was the key not only to history, but also to the “personality of the individual person.” Dinter also applied his racial determinism to religion: “I possess my religion only through my race, because it is only my race that makes my religion possible for me. . . . Race and religion are one!” He argued, as Fritsch had, that the Israelites were not Jewish and that the Prophets had been the voice of a subjected race battling “against foreign Jewish oppressors.”<sup>30</sup> All of these writers supported the notion that Jesus was an “Aryan.”<sup>31</sup>

Even stranger currents of thought were popular at the time, including neo-paganism or “German Faith.” In November 1920, the editors of the *Völkischer Beobachter* asked Hugo Christoph Heinrich Meyer to provide a “guide through the difficult field of German Faith writings.”<sup>32</sup> Meyer was a völkisch writer

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 2, 20.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 1, 213–14.

<sup>27</sup>Evans notes Chamberlain’s undeniable influence, but argues that “durable popular anti-Semitic propagandists” like Fritsch had a greater impact on the party rank-and-file. See Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 33–34, 217–18.

<sup>28</sup>Theodor Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott. Beweismaterial gegen Jahwe*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Leipzig: Hammer-Verlag, 1921), 25. This book was first published as *Beweismaterial gegen Jahwe*; see Uwe Puschner, “Völkische Geschichtsschreibung. Themen, Autoren und Wirkungen völkischer Geschichts-ideologie,” in *Geschichte für Leser. Populäre Geschichtsschreibung in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Wolfgang Hardtwig and Erhard Schütz (Munich: Franz Steiner, 2005), 290.

<sup>29</sup>*Sin against the Blood* sold 235,000 copies by 1927, making it Dinter’s most popular book; see Donald R. Tracey, “The Development of the National Socialist Party in Thuringia, 1924–30,” *Central European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1975): 26, 38.

<sup>30</sup>Artur Dinter, *Die Sünde wider das Blut. Ein Zeitroman*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Leipzig: Matthes & Thost, 1920), 430–31, 102–73. Emphases in original.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 178. For Dinter, this had the consequence that Christianity was a racially specific religion. See also Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>32</sup>VB-102 (Nov. 25, 1920); the paper was not yet in Nazi hands by this point. On the search for a “German Faith,” see Karla O. Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

particularly interested in Old Norse poetry, and he wrote an extensive article that considered the works of authors he deemed most relevant to the search for a “pure German Faith.” Two figures that featured prominently were Dr. Ernst Hunkel and Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen. Hunkel had been well known even before World War I as an advocate of “Germanic” Faith. He “espoused racial ideas and connected them with Nordic beliefs of a mystical nature,” and even established a Germanic commune, the Freiland-Settlement Donnershag (*Freiland-Siedlung Donnershag*).<sup>33</sup> Meyer’s review for the *Völkischer Beobachter* spoke positively of Hunkel’s books, including ones that advocated replacing existing religious forms with new “Germanic” rituals and ceremonies. Meyer also recommended Wolzogen’s *Guide to German Faith* (1919), which sought to promote Germanic faith notions and rituals to a broader audience. In Meyer’s view the book acted as a German Faith “confession,” with Wolzogen demanding that Germans leave the Christian church.<sup>34</sup>

In a far more critical article published in the *Völkischer Beobachter* in December 1920, Meyer dealt with Guido von List (Guido List) and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels (Adolf Lanz)—two prominent völkisch figures who receive scant attention in the studies by Steigmann-Gall and Hastings.<sup>35</sup> Writers for the *Völkischer Beobachter* and Nazi reports certainly relied on List’s notions of the “Armanen,” a supposedly ancient Aryan “priesthood of the sun or the sun-Wotan.”<sup>36</sup> List believed that the Armanen were “priest-kings” and a high caste of the ancient priesthood of Wotan, the Germanic term for Odin.<sup>37</sup> List sought to “rediscover” the Aryan “religion of light” (*Lichtreligion*) through “myths, fairy tales, sagas, opinion, and custom, as well as our Germanic Bible, the *Edda*.”<sup>38</sup> His “basic sources for the ancient religion were the *Edda* and the runes.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*, 112, 120–21; *Handbuch zur “Völkischen Bewegung,” 1871–1918*, 265–67. Donnershag was established on July 13, 1919, on the basis of “race,” “German Faith,” and “German law.” See Alfons Steiger, *Katholizismus und Judentum* (Berlin: Germania, 1923), 96–99.

<sup>34</sup>VB-102 (Nov. 25, 1920); Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen, *Wegweiser zu deutschem Glauben. Versuch einer gemeinverständlichen Darstellung der wesentlichsten Gesichtspunkte der deutsch-religiösen Gemeinden und Verbände* (Oranienburg-Eden: Verlag Jungborn, 1919). I have translated “deutsch” as “German” and “germanisch” as “Germanic.” The latter refers to an older usage relating to the early Germanic tribes; see Bernard Mees, “Hitler and *Germanentum*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (April 2004): 255–70.

<sup>35</sup>Meyer’s main objection was that, in his view, Liebenfels “is far more an Orientalist than a Germanist” and that “Guido von List stands closer to the Kabbalah than to the *Edda*.” See VB-108 (Dec. 16, 1920). There are two references in Hastings and none in Steigmann-Gall. See Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 38, 41.

<sup>36</sup>Guido List, *Die Bilderschrift der Ario-Germanen (Ario-Germanische Hieroglyphik)* (Vienna: Verlag der Guido-von-List-Gesellschaft, 1910), 45, 116–17. See also Guido List, *Die Armanenschaft der Ario-Germanen*, vol. 1 (Vienna: Verlag der Guido-von-List-Gesellschaft, 1908), 17–20.

<sup>37</sup>Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 56–65.

<sup>38</sup>Guido List, *Die Rita der Ario-Germanen*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berlin: Guido von List-Verlag, 1920), 58; the *Edda* is a series of Old Norse poems.

<sup>39</sup>Wolzogen was attracted to List’s ideas, dedicating one of his plays in 1909 to “Guido von List in Vienna, who has rediscovered the ancient wisdom of the Armanen.” List attended the play’s



As discussed later, Liebenfels's obscure ideas also appeared in the *Völkischer Beobachter* after it had come under Nazi control. Liebenfels's work posited the degradation of "godlike Aryan supermen" or "god-men" through bestial miscegenation: the "root of all evil in the world actually had a subhuman animal nature."<sup>40</sup> His key focus was on race and the supposed dangers of "superior" Aryans interbreeding with "lesser races" or with beasts. He supported the notion of Christianity as a "racial cult religion" and interpreted the Bible through a bizarre exegesis which argued that the Old Testament taught the dangers of racial admixture; which depicted Moses as a "Darwinist" and preacher of "racial morality"; and which advocated "a dualistic heresy which describes the battling forces of Good and Evil, typified by the Aryan ace-men and their savior Frauja, a Gothic name for Jesus, who calls for the sacrificial extermination of the sub-men, the 'apelings' and all other racial inferiors."<sup>41</sup> This was the strange worldview out of which Nazism emerged. More to the point, these writings and ideas were often used in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, whose editors assumed that readers were immersed in this völkisch subculture and thus conversant with such texts.<sup>42</sup> In fact, the "positive Christian" Nazi Party did not exclude these figures or their concepts.

To determine whether "positive Christianity" was an attempt to break from such völkisch trends in religion, one must consider the religious views of prominent Nazi leaders involved in the proclamation of the Party Program in 1920. Derek Hastings has examined the address given by Dr. Johannes Dingfelder, the principal speaker at this gathering, as well as the report on the event in the *Völkischer Beobachter*.<sup>43</sup> Dingfelder was a well-known völkisch speaker with no special connection to the Nazi Party. By his own account he had delivered this same speech five times before and had had no knowledge of the DAP or its goals prior to being invited. Dingfelder agreed to present one of his speeches on the condition that it would be made clear at the meeting that he was only appearing as a "guest of the DAP"—which the *Völkischer Beobachter* duly reported.<sup>44</sup> Hastings notes that Dingfelder used the same piece of "völkisch word-play" as

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performance and was introduced to the audience. See Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 45, 66, 71 (quote on p. 49).

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 90–94.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 90, 112, 197; J. Lanz-Liebenfels, *Das Buch der Psalmen deutsch, das Gebetbuch der Ariosophen, Rassenmystiker und Antisimiten* (Düsseldorf-Unterrath: Herbert Reichstein, 1926), vol. 1, 13. "Antisimiten" was Liebenfels's concept of "anti-simia" (against the ape).

<sup>42</sup>This assumption may have been based on the relatively small number of people reading the *Völkischer Beobachter*. According to one scholar's estimates, the paper's circulation was about 10,000 until June 1922, and about 17,000 at its highest point in 1923; see Detlef Mühlberger, *Hitler's Voice: The Völkischer Beobachter, 1920–1933*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), 21.

<sup>43</sup>VB-17 (Feb. 28, 1920). For the full speech, "Was uns not tut," see *Hauptarchiv der NSDAP*/Central Archive of the NSDAP (Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace), Reel 52, File 1214, microform (hereafter HA-File#). According to Dingfelder, the anonymous report in the *Völkischer Beobachter* was written by Max Sesselmann.

<sup>44</sup>"Wie es kam!," HA-1214; VB-17 (Feb. 28, 1920).



the antisemitic author Franz Schröghamer-Heimdal had in an earlier work, *The Coming Reich* (1918). In both formulations, *Arbeit* (“work”) became *Arbot* which, in turn, became *Sonnengebot*. This last term can be translated as the offer or the commandment of the sun, though it generally indicated sun-worship.<sup>45</sup>

This demonstrated the widespread influence of Guido von List on the völkisch movement. There is an abstract connection between *-beit*, *-bot*, and *-gebot*, but Hastings does not explain the translation of *Ar* as “the sun.” This only becomes clear when we turn to one of List’s most influential books, *The Secret of the Runes* (1906), in which he noted that *Ar* meant “the sun, the primal fire, the Aryans, and the eagle.”<sup>46</sup> Following this process, List created multiple interpretations, “reading” everything from myths to heraldic devices.<sup>47</sup> List’s broader influence can be seen in Schröghamer-Heimdal’s musings from 1918: “What then is work [*Arbeit*]? As it stands, one does not note the origin of this little word. . . . The common people do not say ‘*Arbeit*’ but rather ‘*Arbot*.’ ‘*Ar*’ however means the sun and ‘*bot*’ signifies a commandment [*Gebot*]. Therefore, ‘*Arbeit*’ means the commandment of the sun [*Sonnengebot*].”<sup>48</sup>

Hastings argues further that Schröghamer-Heimdal “shaped perceptions of the principle of Positive Christianity at the very moment of its public articulation” by publishing five articles entitled “Was Jesus a Jew?” in the *Völkischer Beobachter* in February and March 1920—under the pseudonym Widar Wälsung.<sup>49</sup> Hastings’s identification of the author might be correct: “Widar” is the name of Odin’s son and avenger in the *Edda*, and the name “Wälsung” itself—which referred to the descendants or tribe of Wotan—was strongly associated with Richard Wagner and the *Ring of the Nibelungen*.<sup>50</sup> It was also connected to the neo-pagan group *Wälsungen-Orden* (The Order of Odin’s Children).<sup>51</sup> Schröghamer himself added the “Nordic suffix ‘Heimdal’ to his name,” which was intended to signify the Nordic god Heimdall, who was “considered to be the guardian of the gods.”<sup>52</sup> Choosing to refer to oneself as a “watchman” of the pagan gods,

<sup>45</sup> Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 75–76.

<sup>46</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 145, 274; “*ar, Sonne, Urfyr, Arier, Adler usw.*,” in Guido List, *Das Geheimnis der Runen*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Berlin: Guido von List-Verlag, 1938), 13.

<sup>47</sup> For instance, the fleur-de-lys became “the ‘*Ar-mal*,’ the symbol of the sun or divinity”; see List, *Die Rita der Ario-Germanen*, 112.

<sup>48</sup> Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 213n155. My translation of the German text, which is quoted by Hastings. See also Dingfelder’s speech, “Was uns not tut,” HA-1214.

<sup>49</sup> Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 76, 69; Widar Wälsung, “War Jesus ein Jude? Eine deutsche Antwort,” VB-16 (Feb. 25, 1920), VB-17 (Feb. 28, 1920), VB-18 (March 3, 1920), VB-19 (March 6, 1920), VB-20 (March 10, 1920).

<sup>50</sup> On “Widar,” see Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 359. He notes “*Víðarr*” was “mainly known as Odin’s avenger.”

<sup>51</sup> HA-851; Reginald H. Phelps, “‘Before Hitler Came’: Thule Society and Germanen Orden,” *Journal of Modern History* 35, no. 3 (1963): 251.

<sup>52</sup> “Franz Schröghamer-Heimdal,” in *Handbuch des Antisemitismus. Judenfeindschaft in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. 2, part 1, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2008), 747–48; “Heimdall,” in Simek, *Northern Mythology*, 135.

or as “Odin’s son,” clearly demonstrates some interest in paganism.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the first of Wälsung’s articles in the *Völkischer Beobachter* began with a form of pagan-Christian blending. It argued that a person could agree with Peter when he said, “Truly, you are Christ, the son of the living God,” but also confess “with the Germanic Centurion under the cross... ‘Truly this must be a heroic light-god!’”<sup>54</sup>

The final article by Wälsung cited Schröngamer-Heimdal’s work and engaged in a series of interpretations of various words and terms that linked him to List’s ideas. Claiming that *Ar* meant “spirit,” the article argued that Aramaic was “an *Aryan* language”—indicated by “*Ar*-amaic”—and that those who spoke it were the same as the “Armanen.” The author claims that “Israel” was not a Jewish word but rather “ancient Aryan” (*urarisches*), meaning the people “of the ‘eternal Light-spirit,’ that is, the ‘people of God,’ the ‘chosen people!’” These chosen people “are and were, however, not the Jews,” but rather “the *Aryan* people”: “The Aryans, Arameans, Armanen, Germanic tribes (*Arier, Aramäer, Armanen, Germanen*) are the predecessors and successors of Christ, the actual Christians who cling to the eternal Light-spirit.”<sup>55</sup> This explanation was completely in line with the *völkisch* notion that the Israelites had been an Aryan people of Palestine, which meant that the Israelites and the Jews were separate races.<sup>56</sup> The idea of Aryan Israelites effectively transformed the Old Testament (or at least sections of it) into Aryan myth. As Wälsung argued in 1920: “Precisely the best in the Bible—the Prophets, the Psalms, etc.—are of Aryan origin.”<sup>57</sup> Steigmann-Gall contends that the Nazis rejected the Old Testament, but the foregoing suggests the need for a more complex interpretation.<sup>58</sup>

These conflicting views about the meaning and significance of the Old Testament can also help to distinguish some of the major conceptual approaches to religion at the time. Christians who adhered to traditional or orthodox faith saw the Old and New Testaments as conjoined and as “divine revelation.” German Faith advocates similarly argued that the two testaments were conjoined and, for that very reason, they rejected Christianity outright as an “Asiatic religion.”<sup>59</sup> Whereas radical *völkisch*-Christian authors like Friedrich Andersen argued for the rejection of

<sup>53</sup>Schröngamer-Heimdal was interested in the *Edda* and in “Widar,” arguing in favor of a kind of pagan-Christian synthesis in 1918; see Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 52–54.

<sup>54</sup>See VB-16 (Feb. 25, 1920). For the statement by Simon Peter, see Matthew 16:16; see also Matthew 27:54, Mark 15:39, Luke 23:47. In the Bible, a centurion at the crucifixion of Christ confesses, “Truly, this man was the Son of God!” Wälsung fundamentally reinterpreted this.

<sup>55</sup>VB-20 (March 10, 1920).

<sup>56</sup>Georg Schott argued this viewpoint during a mass Nazi Party gathering on “National Socialism and Christianity” held for summer solstice on June 21, 1923. See VB-123 (June 23, 1923). His speech is discussed in Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement?,” 409–10. Hastings does not mention the idea of Israelites as non-Jewish.

<sup>57</sup>VB-20 (March 10, 1920).

<sup>58</sup>Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*.

<sup>59</sup>Quotations from VB-13 (13 Feb. 1921); Wolzogen, *Wegweiser zu deutschem Glauben*, 16.

the Old Testament and the refounding of Christianity based solely on Jesus, the Aryan Israelite viewpoint involved a dual perception of the Old Testament: it contained “Jewish thought” that should be rejected, as well as pagan Aryan teachings derived from the Israelites that could be kept.<sup>60</sup>

The völkisch thinkers Fritsch and Chamberlain maintained that the Old Testament derived from “the literatures and religions of older pre-Jewish peoples of culture,” and that it drew on “old Aryan conceptions.”<sup>61</sup> What should be retained from the Old Testament depended on the individual author, though most völkisch writers seem to have included the Prophets. One of the greatest consequences was that this created parallel “Christianities”: one a perverted, “Jewish” understanding of Aryan religion that had conjoined the Old and New Testaments in their entirety and become orthodox faith—the other a religion that traced Aryan faith through the Bible to Jesus. Steigmann-Gall argues that neo-pagans referring positively to Christianity indicated “ambiguity and ambivalence” in their views, but the situation was more complex than this. The belief that Christianity was a corruption of Aryan (pagan) faiths may well explain some of this apparent “ambivalence.”<sup>62</sup>

Wälsung’s articles were subsequently published in 1920 as a book by Lorenz Spindler Verlag, which simultaneously published Friedrich Döllinger’s *Baldur and the Bible*, a work that argued that much of the Old Testament was “Germanic” myth. Döllinger was one of the many pseudonyms of Karl Weinländer, who summarized his own views in *Atlantis, the Edda, and the Bible* (1922).<sup>63</sup> He argued that *Baldur and the Bible* had demonstrated “that Jesus was not a Jew, but rather an Aryan, that therefore Christianity derives from an Aryan-Germanic source, and that the pre-Jewish and allegedly Jewish culture of Palestine was Germanic”—in short, that paganism *was* Christianity. Exactly like Wälsung, Weinländer/Döllinger considered the “people of God” to be the “Aryans, Aramaens = Armanen” (*Arier, Aramäer = Armanen*): they were worshipers of the “light-god” and were the “predecessors and successors of Christ.”<sup>64</sup>

Wälsung and Döllinger advanced many of the same ideas. According to the former, for example, *Hallelujah* was “an Aryan cry of jubilation and means the

<sup>60</sup>Friedrich Andersen, *Der deutsche Heiland* (Munich: Deutscher Volksverlag, 1921).

<sup>61</sup>Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1, 237, 414–15, 420–22; Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott*, 25.

<sup>62</sup>Steigmann-Gall, “Rethinking Nazism and Religion,” 103–5.

<sup>63</sup>This was written under another pseudonym: Hermann Wieland, *Atlantis, Edda und Bibel. Das entdeckte Geheimnis der Heiligen Schrift, des deutschen Volkes Rettung aus Not und Tod* (Nuremberg: C. K. Wuzel, 1922). On Weinländer/Döllinger/Wieland, see *Völkisch-religiöse Bewegung*, 206. He also wrote as Werner Stauffacher.

<sup>64</sup>Widar Wälsung, *War Jesus ein Jude? Eine deutsche Antwort*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Nuremberg: Lorenz Spindler Verlag, 1920); Friedrich Döllinger, *Baldur und Bibel. Germanische Kultur im biblischen Kanaan und Germanisches Christentum vor Christus* (Nuremberg: Lorenz Spindler Verlag, 1920), 49, 69. On “Baldur,” see Simek, *Northern Mythology*, 26–32.

affirmation of the All-El or the All-Light-spirit.” He also pointed to Christ calling out on the cross to “El-Elion,” noting: “one thinks of our German light (*hell*), of Helios and Elies—the noteworthy thing was that the *Jews* did not understand him: proof of just how foreign to them the ‘Light-spirit,’ the ‘Father,’ was!”<sup>65</sup> Wälsung did not believe that the Aryan “Light-spirit” god of Jesus was the god of the Jews. That same idea appeared in Döllinger’s work, which argued that “*Jesus Christ was a German*” whose “god is a different one from the Jewish [god],” and who—“in his greatest distress” when nailed to the cross—“turned not to the Jewish god Yahweh but rather to the Germanic god of light, Eli-Elion (Baldur), whose name was incomprehensible to the surrounding Jews.”<sup>66</sup> Wälsung was clearly drawing on Fritsch’s book *The False God*, which had promoted the notion of a fundamental difference between “El-Elion and El-Schaddai”: the former was the “spirit of light,” equivalent to Ahriman in Zoroastrian teaching and to the Christian God, the latter a “spirit of darkness” equivalent to Ormuzd and the Devil.<sup>67</sup> Ahriman and Ormuzd derived from a broader völkisch interest in the theosophy of Helena Blavatsky, who had written about them in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).<sup>68</sup> Arguing that El-Elion and El-Schaddai had been the “gods of the Canaanite peoples before the Jews had come into the country,” Fritsch established the link later repeated by Wälsung: “I find in Elion a connection to the Greek helios—sun, light.” He argues that “El-Schaddai” became the god of the Jews (Yahweh), using Jesus’s cry to “El-Elion” during the crucifixion as a principal piece of evidence to show that Jesus had adhered to the “Light-spirit” and that the god of the Jews was not the god of Christ.<sup>69</sup>

Artur Dinter’s *Sin against the Blood* contained these very same passages from Fritsch and was undoubtedly Wälsung’s source.<sup>70</sup> Though Wälsung did not connect his articles to the NS(DAP) or to “positive Christianity,” he did make every effort to connect them to Dinter’s work. In fact, three of the articles in the *Völkischer Beobachter* relied extensively on quotations from *Sin against the Blood*. Although Wälsung did not agree with all of Dinter’s views, he quoted with approval the notion that the “spiritual opposition between Jesus and the Jews can only be explained by the opposition of their race,” because the “form of our feelings and thoughts” were connected “in the most intimate relationship and interaction to the type of our blood and nerves”—a point Dinter sought to

<sup>65</sup>This refers to Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” See VB-20 (March 10, 1920).

<sup>66</sup>Döllinger, *Baldur und Bibel*, 133.

<sup>67</sup>Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott*, 61–63.

<sup>68</sup>Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 18–23.

<sup>69</sup>Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott*, 63, 65. He also used the term *Lichtgeist*. Wälsung, however, argued that the name “*Jesus Christ* itself is of Aryan origin” and that it was connected to “*Sohn des Ja, Jovis, Jahwe*”; see VB-20 (March 10, 1920).

<sup>70</sup>Dinter, *Sünde wider Blut*, 372–77. This quoted large sections from *Der falsche Gott* (1916), including the material on “El-Elion” and “El-Schaddai.”

prove by arguing that a “blackthorn” never bore “apples or pears.” Wälsung also quoted Dinter’s idea that “the interconnection of religion and race is unmistakable everywhere,” as well as his conclusion “that Jesus is not a Jew, but rather an Aryan or Indo-Germanic, which is the same thing.” This fit with Wälsung’s own explanation that “God the Father and [God] the Holy Spirit” would not have placed Christ into the “impure, unholy body of a Jew,” but rather into the “highest developed and purest, most beautiful [form]” that “was and is still today the Aryan-Indo-Germanic racial type. It is without doubt that the highest spirit also chose the best form.”<sup>71</sup>

Dinter was not the sole source for Wälsung’s articles, which also followed Chamberlain’s notions of the “racial soul,” or the idea that “the blood is the carrier of the soul.”<sup>72</sup> Wälsung certainly argued that the “impure spirit” was carried in “Jewish blood.”<sup>73</sup> His articles were mystical and racial accounts with direct links to the ideas of List, Fritsch, and Dinter. If these articles “shaped perceptions of the principle of Positive Christianity,” as Hastings suggests, then positive Christianity embodied völkisch religious ideas.<sup>74</sup> It is clear that the early Nazi Party was not dissociating itself from the works of Dinter or Fritsch, as both authors continued to be promoted and defended in the *Völkischer Beobachter*.<sup>75</sup> But Hastings’s argument that Wälsung’s articles supported the Nazi Program—and specifically “positive Christianity”—does not stand up to scrutiny. There are no references to the DAP, to National Socialism, or even to “positive Christianity” in Wälsung’s articles from 1920—all of which weakens Hastings’s assertion that the series was a “manifesto built on the principle of Positive Christianity.”<sup>76</sup>

There has been a great deal of emphasis placed on “positive Christianity” in recent historical studies, but, in February 1920, it was not reported as a key point of the Nazi platform. Instead, newspaper articles at the time—including a report in the *Völkischer Beobachter*—highlighted Dingfelder’s address and only two aspects of the Nazi Program: the demand for a “Greater Germany,” and

<sup>71</sup>VB-17 (Feb. 28, 1920); VB-18 (March 3, 1920); VB-19 (March 6, 1920). Hastings does not mention this heavy reliance on Dinter.

<sup>72</sup>This line comes from an article by Willi Damm in VB-10 (Feb. 4, 1920); Damm cited Schröghamer-Heimdal as an inspiration. Such concepts were not uncommon in the völkisch movement, and Fritsch (writing as Fritz Thor) argued, “whosoever pollutes his blood, kills the god within himself”; see Steiger, *Katholizismus und Judentum*, 141.

<sup>73</sup>VB-17 (Feb. 28, 1920).

<sup>74</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 76.

<sup>75</sup>Fritsch and Dinter were prominently advertised in VB-37 (May 12, 1921). Rosenberg did criticize the notion that “true Occultism” was necessary in order to succeed as a völkisch party, and attacked Dinter for his supposed interest in spiritualism; see VB-60 (July 31, 1921). Despite this, Dinter’s works were still being advertised by the VB bookshop in VB-95 (Dec. 14, 1921). See also the continued advertisement of Fritsch’s publications and the defense of both *Sin against the Blood* and *The False God* in VB-62 (April 8–9, 1923); VB-76 (April 25, 1923); VB-93 (May 16, 1923).

<sup>76</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 79.

Gottfried Feder's proposal to "break the slavery of interest."<sup>77</sup> Hastings claims that Wälsung's articles were prominent in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, but they were no more prominent than another series that had preceded them in the very same section of the paper: "The Jewish Patriarchs in the Light of Antisemitism."<sup>78</sup> Hastings provides no evidence in support of his assertion that the series of articles by Wälsung "dominated . . . discussions within the DAP more generally beginning on the night of the party's first mass meeting," or that they "dominated religious-oriented conversations within the movement beginning on the evening of 24 February 1920."<sup>79</sup>

According to the police report on the meeting of February 24, Hitler read out the program after Dingfelder's speech. This was followed by a speech by the prominent völkisch figure Max Sesselmann, editor of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, who hailed the DAP Program, spoke on "moral order" and materialism, and concluded with a call for "German Socialism" that linked to his role as a leader of the völkisch and antisemitic German Socialist Party (DSP): "First and foremost we have to think and act German again, and only then will we be socialists in the truest sense of the word." Three more people spoke at the meeting, two of whom openly opposed the DAP. There is no indication that Wälsung and his ideas were discussed.<sup>80</sup>

It appears more relevant to consider the views of the two most prominent DAP members who spoke at the February 24 meeting: Hitler and Sesselmann.<sup>81</sup> Since both men were clearly aware of the Nazi Program, it is important to ask how they described their understanding of religious belief in the months following the declaration for "positive Christianity." Two months after the DAP meeting, Sesselmann attended a national conference of the German Socialist Party. At this April 1920 gathering, the DSP Program—declared as the manifesto of the *Völkischer Beobachter* itself in January 1920—was reconsidered in light of the

<sup>77</sup>See the newspaper reports in HA-1478.

<sup>78</sup>That series, "Die jüdischen Patriarchen in antisemitischer Beleuchtung," relied heavily on Eugen Dühring and concluded that the Old Testament should no longer be taught in schools. See VB-15 (Feb. 21, 1920). Dühring argued "in terms of racial categories" and "condemned the Jew as a whole" because he "linked depravity in culture, morals and manners to inherent racial traits possessed by all Jews"; see Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*, 131. See also the sections from Dühring and the positive review of his ideas, including the open acknowledgement that Dühring opposed Christianity, in VB-12 (Feb. 9, 1923); VB-121 (June 21, 1923); VB-75 (Sept. 20, 1922).

<sup>79</sup>He only refers to the articles themselves to support these claims. See Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 76, 79.

<sup>80</sup>Hitler also chaired the meeting. See this police report in HA-1478.

<sup>81</sup>Max Sesselmann was a "person of note" in the early Nazi Party; see Phelps, "Before Hitler Came," 255. He was the leader of the German Socialist Party in Munich, but had also joined the DAP in December 1919 and often spoke at meetings alongside Hitler; see Adolf Hitler, *Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen: 1905–1924*, ed. Eberhard Jäckel and Axel Kuhn (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1980), 1288.

Nazis' recent proclamation.<sup>82</sup> In the debate on religion, Sesselmann gave his vote of support to "Dr. Lanz Liebenfels" (Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels), arguing that "an Aryan religious idea has to permeate our movement."<sup>83</sup> Sesselmann's own explanation of his views on religion does not correspond to Hastings's depiction of them: "In May 1919 the editorial duties at the *Völkischer Beobachter* were taken up by two professing Catholics, Max Sesselmann and Hanns Georg Müller, whose ideas conflicted strongly with [the anti-Christian ideas] of [Rudolf] Sebottendorff."<sup>84</sup>

Hitler, the other major DAP figure at the February 24 meeting, revealed his ideas on religion on August 13 in a lengthy speech that relied on völkisch writers such as Guido von List and Theodor Fritsch. Hitler opened his speech with ideas taken from List: that the "Aryan, during the ice age, engaged in building his spiritual and bodily strength in the hard fight with nature, arising quite differently than other races who lived without struggle in the midst of a bountiful world."<sup>85</sup> Hitler openly addressed pagan notions only six months after the Nazis had spoken out in favor of "positive Christianity." Referring to the "Nordic races," he stated:

We know that that all of these people held one sign in common: the symbol of the sun. All of their cults were built on *light*, and you can find this symbol, the means of the generation of fire, the Quirl, the cross. You can find this cross as a swastika not only here [in Germany], but also exactly the same [symbol] carved into temple posts in India and Japan. It is the swastika of the community (*Gemeinwesen*) once founded by Aryan culture (*Kultur*).<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup>This connection has not been previously identified. See "Deutschwirtschaft" by the editors in VB-3 (Jan. 10, 1920) (the paper was called the *Deutschwirtschaftszeitung* at this point) and compare this editorial to the DSP Program of 1918 and 1920; see "Aus der Bewegung" (report on the Nuremberg DSP), VB-2 (Jan. 7, 1920); Rudolf von Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam. Urkundliches aus der Frühzeit der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Munich: Deukula-Verlag, 1933), 171–82 and 205.

<sup>83</sup>DSP-Parteitag, in HA-109.

<sup>84</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 66, 126–27. Müller was a member of the *Wälsungen-Orden* at this point; he was later a member of the Edda Society (*Eddagesellschaft*), founded in 1925 to reconstruct "the Aryan religion" on "the basis of the runes, occultism, and the Edda"; see Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 155, 159, 254n14; Georg Franz, "Munich: Birthplace and Center of the National Socialist German Workers' Party," *Journal of Modern History* 29, no. 4 (1957): 327.

<sup>85</sup>Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna: A Dictator's Apprenticeship*, trans. Thomas Thornton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 210–13. The summary of List's view (as quoted) is in George L. Mosse, "The Mystical Origins of National Socialism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1961): 93.

<sup>86</sup>Speech delivered by Hitler on August 13, 1920, in *Aufzeichnungen*, 186. On this speech, see also Reginald H. Phelps, "Hitlers 'grundlegende' Rede über den Antisemitismus," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 16 (1968): 390–420. Phelps noted various probable influences, including the writings of Ludwig Wilser and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, as well as Theodor Fritsch's *Handbook on the Jewish Question* (p. 397). Sebottendorff credited Ludwig Wilser with establishing the notion that the swastika was a "common Aryan symbol of the sun"; see Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam*, 240.



It is worth noting this equivalency between the “cross” and the Quirl—which can be translated as a “whisk” or “whorl”—as symbols of the sun, for this was a broadly accepted notion in the völkisch movement.

The idea of a common Aryan spiritual inheritance around “cults of light” was in accordance with the ideas of List. In *The Secret of the Runes*, List provided an illustration of the Quirl as a circular symbol containing a swastika, in a row of ten symbols that also included a swastika and a cross. This was not necessarily the source from which Hitler had derived the notion that “the sign of the sun” was common to the Aryans, but it was illustrative of the fact that such ideas existed in völkisch ideology, and of the meaning of a Quirl.<sup>87</sup> In fact, List drew a direct link between the cross (which he referred to as a “Fyrfos”) and the swastika, describing the “Fyrfos” as meaning *Feuerzeugung* (“generation of fire”), which was similar to the phrase later used by Hitler himself (*Feuererzeugung*).<sup>88</sup> In another work, List noted that the Fyrfos was an emblem of the sun and “the most sacred secret symbol” of the Armanen; he also argued that “the sun was the highest symbol of divinity in all religions.”<sup>89</sup> List considered “Hermes Trismegistus, Wotan, Krishna, Buddha, [and] Christ” to be equivalent “god-men” (*Gottmenschen*)—a point worth noting, given that Hitler himself mentioned the swastika as something common to Germany, as well as to the temples of India and Japan.<sup>90</sup> The actual religions connected to such temples, Hinduism and Buddhism, were irrelevant; Hitler was interested in their supposedly common Aryan religiosity. He went on to discuss Christianity, and drew on the ideas of Fritsch’s *The False God*—a point not previously established in the literature.<sup>91</sup>

Hitler began his speech with a lengthy account of the differences between people living in northern and southern climes. The “Nordic” race, he argued, possessed three characteristics—all of which were lacking in the Jews—that were necessary for the development of states: “work as a duty” for the good of the whole; “physical health” and thus a healthy intelligence; and “deep inner spiritual life.” According to Hitler, the presence of these three qualities proved that the “Nordic races” were capable of and responsible for culture as a whole—a view in line with the völkisch trope that the Aryan race was the founder of all great civilizations. He claimed that the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Persia,

<sup>87</sup>The influence of Liebenfels and List on Hitler remains contested; see Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936*, 49–50.

<sup>88</sup>List, *Geheimnis der Runen*, 20, 44.

<sup>89</sup>List, *Die Bilderschrift der Ario-Germanen* 1, 43–45.

<sup>90</sup>List added “Goethe, Beethoven, Kant, Richard Wagner, [and] Bismarck,” and stated that it was a great error that “a ‘god-man’ would appear as the son of god” only once “in the entire life of humanity.” *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>91</sup>Phelps’s consideration of the *Beweismaterial gegen Jahwe* was fairly limited; see Phelps, “‘Grundlegende’ Rede,” 398.

and Greece had all been elevated to the “height of culture” thanks to the immigration of “blond, blue-eyed Aryans.”<sup>92</sup>

Turning to the Jews and the Bible, Hitler argued that he “would not vouch for the fact that everything in [the Bible] is completely true, because we know that Jewry worked on it very freely.” Theodor Fritsch had expressed similar thoughts, but Hitler went even further, stating that “at least one thing is certain: no antisemite wrote it.” This was clearly an attack on the Bible, primarily the Old Testament. But Hitler also considered it revelatory of “Jewish” character that “no antisemite could have written a more terrible work of indictment against the Jewish race than the Bible, the Old Testament.”<sup>93</sup>

Hitler argued that “the Jew” also lacked an “inner spiritual experience.” Relying on Fritsch’s work, as well as on Adolf Wahrmund’s ideas about Jews as “nomads,” he stated that there was a fundamental “division” between the “northern Israelite tribes” and the “nomadic” Jews “of the tribe of Judah and Caleb.” He claimed that this division had first been overcome by King David through the “cult of the god Yahweh,” and that “the Jews” had killed off the “original tribes in Palestine.”<sup>94</sup> These ideas came from Fritsch, who not only differentiated between Jews and Israelites, but also claimed that David had been the first king from the “tribe of Judah” to rule over “Israel and Judah,” supposedly bringing the Israelites under the rule of an unwanted minority.<sup>95</sup> Hitler went on to argue that Christianity had been used by the Jews for their own ends, above all their effort to undermine the state. He argued that “the Jew” supported “this new religion” and was “its greatest promoter” because (in Hitler’s view) they recognised that Christianity “only acknowledged a higher supernatural Lord [and] would take an ax to the roots of the Roman state.” Hitler drew a comparison between early Christianity and twentieth-century socialism, believing that both movements had been subverted by Jews: in his view, “the Jew” could never be “a Christian” or “a worker.”<sup>96</sup> He went on to describe Jesus Christ’s “new teaching” as “nothing other than a renaissance of the obvious (*Selbstverständlichkeit*),” namely that “people should not be without rights in a state” and that rights also entailed commensurate duties. In short, Hitler was expressing ideas deriving from the *völkisch* movement, including the notion of an older and continuing Aryan spirituality revolving around “cults of light”—a spirituality that came to be expressed in a variety of religions, including an “Aryan” Christianity.

As the foregoing suggests, this speech—which combined aspects of List’s work with that of Fritsch—was both an attack on Christian faith and a vindication of it. Christianity was a tool of the Jews and the Bible itself had been written by Jews,

<sup>92</sup>Speech, August 13, 1920, in Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 185–86. This was in line with Chamberlain.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 187–88.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 189.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.; also see Fritsch, *Der falsche Gott*, 18–20, 25.

<sup>96</sup>Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 191–92.

but something might nevertheless be salvaged from an Aryan Jesus who had preached a “doctrine of the obvious.” Significant figures such as Sesselmann and Hitler expressed these views as individuals, but the adherence to esoteric strands of religion were in evidence as well at official party events such as the Nazis’ first Christmas, the subject of the next section.

### The First Nazi Christmas

The Nazi Party’s acquisition of the *Völkischer Beobachter* on December 18, 1920, meant that the first Nazi Christmas could be reported by the members of the party in their own official newspaper.<sup>97</sup> As a wholly owned publication of the NSDAP, this gave members complete control over the manner in which their movement was portrayed. How, then, did the NSDAP depict their understanding of religion in the first public celebration of Christmas? As reported in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, it was an entirely pagan event. Not only was the Munich “Christmas festival” (*Weihnachtsfeier*) celebrated for winter solstice on December 22, 1920, but the report in the *Völkischer Beobachter* openly and publicly proclaimed its link to the völkisch ideas of Guido von List. Each celebration, in Munich and Rosenheim, was referred to as a *Weihnachtsfeier*, meaning a festival of the “holy” or “sacred” night, as well as a *Julfest*, or “Yule festival”: the Germanic pagan festival for winter solstice. More significant, the term *Christfest* (“celebration of Christ”) was not used.<sup>98</sup>

The report about the first Nazi Christmas was likely written by the paper’s editors, not Hitler, though it had every appearance of his approval: in fact, his own New Year’s greeting appeared just beneath it.<sup>99</sup> The theme of the event was “to bring joy to poor children and to honor the Party.” Christ was not mentioned, and the report noted that the larger purpose of the celebration was to bring together “the loyal and worthy core of a movement to which the German future must belong.”<sup>100</sup> The reason for this was the disastrous situation in postwar Germany, principally the revolutions of 1918–19: “All this the *Edda* and the teachings of the Armanen had already prophesied in ancient times.”<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> A notice appeared stating that the NSDAP had taken over the *Völkischer Beobachter* as of December 18, 1920. See VB-110/111 (Dec. 25, 1920).

<sup>98</sup> One critic of the NSDAP noted this: “The ancient Germanic tribes called the winter solstice the Yule festival,” contrasting this with the *Christfest* (Christmas). See the report from January 18, 1922 in the *Donau-Zeitung*, HA-1479. On the distinction between the “pre-Christian” *Weihnachten* and the *Christfest*, see Perry, “Nazifying Christmas,” 576–77. In December 1922 the event was advertised as a *Weihnachtsfest* but also called a *Christfest*, whereas Hitler was advertised as the speaker who would give the *Julrede*, or “Yule speech”; see VB-98 (Dec. 9, 1922); VB-99 (Dec. 13, 1922); VB-100 (Dec. 16, 1922).

<sup>99</sup> “Aus der Bewegung,” VB 1–2 (Jan. 6, 1921); Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 296.

<sup>100</sup> VB 1–2 (Jan. 6, 1921). Unless otherwise indicated, I rely on the translation in Mühlberger, *Hitler’s Voice*, 1, 83–84.

<sup>101</sup> VB 1–2 (Jan. 6, 1921). My translation.

Indeed, the paradise sought by the party was not the Christian one, but rather that of the Norse gods: "One day more happy times will come for the Aryan race—a new Idafeld."<sup>102</sup> The reference to the *Edda* clearly meant Ragnarok, or the "twilight of the gods."<sup>103</sup> The fact that this first Christmas event was held at solstice was consistent with the notions of sun-worship underlying List's work.

According to Joe Perry, "Germans had already embraced 'völkisch' ideas about the Germanic roots of Christmas long before the Nazis adopted them." He traces the practice to "clear nineteenth-century precedents," and is certainly correct about the broader cultural context and the "climate of historicism that pervaded late nineteenth-century scholarship," which focused on the "unique 'German-ness' of Christmas" and argued that "holiday observances were holdovers from pre-Christian tribal rituals and popular folk superstitions."<sup>104</sup> Yet, it is telling that the newspaper report on the first Nazi Christmas was specifically linked to völkisch thought and paganism. This open adherence to the "teachings of the Armanen" in the Nazis' official paper relates to a key point made by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. Hitler received a book in 1921 from a Nazi Party member that bore the inscription: "To Adolf Hitler my dear Armanen-brother," and Goodrick-Clarke has argued that the "use of the esoteric term suggests a shared interest in the work of List."<sup>105</sup> The editors of *Völkischer Beobachter* similarly assumed that their readers had an interest in the work of List, given that they offered no further explanation of the esoteric "teachings of the Armanen." Despite the NSDAP's alleged recognition of "positive Christianity," the 1920 Nazi Christmas was a celebration of pagan solstice that involved a stated adherence to Norse "prophecy" and List's ideas. As reported in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the event did not focus on the prophesied birth of Christ, but rather on the prophesied apocalyptic situation in the *Edda* and the supposedly ancient pagan "teaching" of a priesthood caste dedicated to Odin.

The report on the first Nazi Christmas has to be considered in the wider context of the *Völkischer Beobachter* at the beginning of 1921. Religion was, at the time, a major topic of debate in völkisch circles. As Hastings has argued, the *Völkischer Beobachter* published a "programmatic article" that defended Nazi views on religion and dealt with this contemporary debate about "Aryan faith."<sup>106</sup> And it is for these reasons that the report deserves to be examined. The author, listed as "Fr. Dietrich," argued in favor of a "pure, Aryan Christianity," but simultaneously demonstrated the curious blend of pagan and

<sup>102</sup>Mühlberger, *Hitler's Voice*, 1, 84.

<sup>103</sup>On "Idafeld" or "Íðavöllr," see Simek, *Northern Mythology*, 170. Simek notes that Idafeld was a "mythical plain" that was "part of the home of the [Norse] gods." For the passages on Ragnarok in the *Edda*, see Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 19, 58–61.

<sup>104</sup>Perry, "Nazifying Christmas," 575–76.

<sup>105</sup>The book came from Dr. Babette Steininger. See Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 199.

<sup>106</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 105.

esoteric influences—including List and Liebenfels—that were supposed to inform this religion.<sup>107</sup> Dietrich began with a summary of the range of religious views in the völkisch movement, including spiritualism. He believed that a key concern should be race, which was certainly in line with Nazi ideology. Dietrich claimed that a “degeneration and bestialization” had occurred in society because of a lack of concern for the racial purity of offspring.<sup>108</sup> Borrowing from Liebenfels, he used the term *Tschandalen*. This drew on Liebenfels’s interest in the “Hindu codes of Manu,” from which he had taken “the Sanskrit term *candala* (*Tschandale*), which denoted the lowest caste of untouchables,” and then used it to describe “the mongrelized racial inferiors and lower social classes of modern times.”<sup>109</sup> Dietrich used this term as a matter of course without providing any explanation.

There is little doubt that Dietrich was a disciple of Liebenfels. He referred to “the savior Jesus Christ, also called Frauja (Gothic) and Froh,” echoing Liebenfels’s earlier use of these terms.<sup>110</sup> “Froh” referred to the pagan god Freyr, following Richard Wagner’s usage.<sup>111</sup> The larger concern for Dietrich was the *Rassenseele*, or “racial soul”—and specifically its absence among Jews. Aligning himself with the views of writers such as Chamberlain, Dietrich argued that religion was dictated by the “tug of the racial soul,” i.e., by characteristics possessed by or lacking in a particular race. He believed that Aryans were beneficiaries of a continuing spiritual inheritance that had become their Christian faith: a faith of “the Goths, the Vandals, and many other tribes of the Germanic Volk,” which had allowed them to perform heroic deeds. Relying on Guido von List, Dietrich contended that this faith had been formed “in the sign of the cross, which . . . is an ancient Aryan sacred symbol that derives its origin directly from the swastika.” What had supposedly “obscured” (*verdunkelt*) this faith was the “dark racial spirit” that destroyed “the Aryan religion of light

<sup>107</sup>VB-4 (Jan. 13, 1921). A year earlier Dietrich had recommended Liebenfels in an article entitled “Problem aller Probleme”; see VB-3 (Jan. 10, 1920). In this earlier paper he argued for “the sacredness of the blood,” calling for “priests and leaders of the people” to “again preach racial teaching and care for the race,” which, he believed, was advocated by “holy scripture”—ideas deriving from Liebenfels.

<sup>108</sup>VB-4 (Jan. 13, 1921). For a comparable discussion on the “defilement of the race,” including the idea that marriage should “produce images of the Lord and not monstrosities between man and ape,” see Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 444–45.

<sup>109</sup>Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 100, 242n36. I have translated this as “mongrelized.”

<sup>110</sup>VB-4 (Jan. 13, 1921). In 1926 Liebenfels summarized his writings, which dated back to the early twentieth century: “I have brought the anthropological and archaeological proof that the gods once actually lived upon this earth. . . . Froh-di, Frauja, Teuto is the god-become-man, the ‘god-man’ (*Gottmensch*) and in the ancient ariosophical writings consubstantial with the ‘son’ or ‘Christ.’” He argued that these were names for the “Tribal-god” of the Aryan race. See Lanz-Liebenfels, *Das Buch der Psalmen deutsch*, 1, 13.

<sup>111</sup>Simek notes that Freyr was “the most powerful god of fertility of Germanic mythology,” that “Fröði and Freyr are identical,” and that “Teut” was a “god invented by poets in the eighteenth century” and came from “Tuisto.” See Simek, *Northern Mythology*, 91–92, 313.

(*Lichtreligion*), the faith in the hero of light and Logos, in the savior Jesus Christ."<sup>112</sup>

A continuation of ancient Aryan belief, Aryan Christianity was now in dire straits. Dietrich held that there had been an "obfuscation of the true sense of Christianity" because "non-Aryan Priests" had "shrouded and mongrelized this Aryan-Christian faith," just as "the mongrelized Rabbis of the judaized Israelites had made the hebraic version of the *Edda* (the Bible) into a Jewish book" by twisting whatever "did not fit with their racial soul, [but] without . . . being able to touch the core, which, because it was of a pure Aryan spirit, was incomprehensible to them."<sup>113</sup> This article, with its pagan-Christian elements (the *Edda* as the Bible, the swastika as the cross), placed the Nazi Party firmly within the esoteric völkisch tradition. In fact, Dietrich's opinion was close to that of Döllinger: the Bible was "Aryan-Germanic" pagan myth that had been misunderstood and misappropriated by the Jews. Once again, the Jews were not the Israelites.

Dietrich did not seek to "fabricate a surrogate [religion]," but wished instead to rediscover Aryan Christianity as a continuation of ancient Germanic faith. This meant stripping away everything that had been added by the "uncircumcized Jew-pack"; removing "lower racial" notions that had accrued over the centuries; having only "pure Aryan priests"; and taking back "*our* churches, which were primarily nothing other than pure Aryan places of cult-worship, Germanic *Halgadome*."<sup>114</sup> *Halgadam* was a peculiar term derived from List's ideas of "sacred places" (*Halgadome*, *Heilstätte*), including "the church of Wotan or the Armanen."<sup>115</sup> Dietrich may well have been relying on List's argument in favor of a "Wotanist background to any Christian institution" – an argument based on the idea that "old pagan shrines had probably not been destroyed, but merely newly consecrated and re-dedicated to Christian saints."<sup>116</sup>

Dietrich's article also points to a key issue in the historiography: the need to understand the völkisch-religious roots of Nazism. Hastings has misread this article on "Aryan Faith" because he did not grasp the links to earlier authors, contending that it was a defense launched by the *Völkischer Beobachter* in response to attacks from the Catholic cleric Augustin Bea, who had connected the

<sup>112</sup>VB-4 (Jan. 13, 1921). List wrote on "Logos" and the idea that the Aryan *Lichtreligion* and its rites were "obscured" (*verdunkelt*) by the "dark as night Asiatic-Roman demon-faith"; see List, *Rita der Ario-Germanen*, 55.

<sup>113</sup>VB-4 (Jan. 13, 1921).

<sup>114</sup>Ibid. I have used the German form (*Halgadam*) because it is a peculiar term.

<sup>115</sup>List, *Die Armanenschaft der Ario-Germanen*, 1, 20. See also Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 57.

<sup>116</sup>See Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 67–8, 237. List supposedly rediscovered "an extended network of shrines and sanctuaries dedicated to the gods of the Wotanist religion." The "Halgadam" concept was also used in the secret leagues of the Germanic Order and Thule Society, völkisch groups that included in their ranks some of the leading figures of the Nazi Party; see Phelps, "Before Hitler Came," 245–61; Sebottendorff, *Bevor Hitler kam*, 24–25, 42, 190, 202.

“radical anti-Semitism of the local völkisch milieu, including the NSDAP, to the Germanic racial and religious ideas of both Fritsch and Dinter.” Arguing that Dietrich was directly “distancing himself (and the NSDAP) from the anti-Christian Germanic religious ideologies with which the Nazis were being linked,” Hastings states that the article “urged völkisch Catholics to stay faithful to the Catholic ‘faith of their fathers.’”<sup>117</sup> Yet, Dietrich was fixed solidly within völkisch traditions, and the notion that the article was “written clearly for a Catholic audience” is incorrect.<sup>118</sup> Rather, it was written for a völkisch audience. Even Dietrich’s understanding of “Christianity” was questionable, given his reliance on Liebenfels—though the article does seem to agree with the latter’s ideas about Christianity as a “racial cult religion.” This programmatic article linked the Nazis completely to List, Liebenfels, and the entire world of esoteric faith that they represented, and demonstrated, moreover, that the Nazis were indeed a völkisch party.

Hastings relies too heavily on Dietrich’s argument that Christianity was not necessarily “saturated with a semitic spirit,” and that it should therefore not be discarded outright (as some German Faith advocates argued).<sup>119</sup> This is certainly correct, but Dietrich also believed that the Christian faith was controlled by Jews. He warned that both the German Faith *and* Christianity might be imbued with a “semitic spirit” if the leaders of these religions did not heed “the racial question . . . the question of the breed and pure-breed of Aryan-heroic people.”<sup>120</sup> This drew on völkisch notions of a particular “racial” spirituality (the “racial soul”), which could only be maintained through *physical* racial purity, i.e., through Aryans leading and controlling the religious system. If the “new German Faith” were to become a “religious system” like “Catholicism or Buddhism,” without sufficient emphasis on race, then “mixed-breeds (*Mischlinge*) [and] uncircumcized and circumcized Jews would soon take over leading roles in the German faith” and drag it down to their “lower racial” level so that the German Faith would “find itself in exactly the same situation that Christianity finds itself in today.” The essential notion was one of physical purging, with Jesus driving the money changers from the Temple cited as the appropriate example to follow.<sup>121</sup>

A year after they had proclaimed their support for positive Christianity, the Nazis were publicly supporting—also in debates about the meaning of “Aryan Faith”—the neo-pagan and esoteric religious views of the völkisch movement, from the teachings of the Armanen to Liebenfels. Derek Hastings contends that the Bavarian People’s Party “and its allies in the press” attempted “to label the Nazi movement in Munich as religiously dangerous to Catholics by linking it to the anti-Catholic or overtly anti-Christian sentiments of völkisch organisations

<sup>117</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 105.

<sup>118</sup>Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement?,” 399.

<sup>119</sup>VB-4 (Jan. 13, 1921).

<sup>120</sup>Ibid. The term *arisch-heroisch* was used by Liebenfels; see Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 110.

<sup>121</sup>VB-4 (Jan.13, 1921).



elsewhere.”<sup>122</sup> Dietrich’s article made it clear that there was a solid basis for such an argument, and showed that there was often no clear delineation between “Aryan” Christianity and paganism: some völkisch writers genuinely believed that the two systems of religion were the same. The early Nazi Party clearly accepted a diverse range of views.<sup>123</sup>

As we have seen, the Nazi Christmas of 1920 celebrated winter solstice, and the party would celebrate summer solstice in 1921 (Easter was noticeably absent). Anton Drexler covered the 1921 event in *Der Nationalsozialist*, as the *Völkischer Beobachter* was temporarily known. (Drexler was an important Nazi leader who had founded the DAP with Karl Harrer.) The main speaker at this “National Socialist solstice” argued, “A visible sign of the return to German thought is the resurgence of the wonderful old custom of the festival of solstice.” Drexler and the speaker saw the solstice as indicative of their own antisemitic worldview, which involved the possibility of Germany’s revival from subjugation by the Jews.<sup>124</sup>

The solstice was a pagan celebration, and the Nazi newspaper reported on others “from the movement” who celebrated it as such. Alongside Drexler’s report was an extensive consideration of Ernst and Margart Hunkel’s utopian settlement Donnershag and the solstice celebrated by the settlers of this “Germanic Order.”<sup>125</sup> Ernst Hunkel gave a rousing solstice speech in 1921, which the *Völkischer Beobachter* quoted at length: “The summer solstice is a symbol of the sinking light, of dying life. Its secret is the certainty of rebirth.” Hunkel was referring to the idea that Germany would experience a comparable resurgence. His sources were the Germanic pagan gods and heroes, and he mentions the death of “Baldur, the sun-god,” and the saga of the “sun-hero and son of god Siegfried.” He implied as well that there was a history of “Siegfried” as a savior across German history, referring in particular to “Armin” (Hermann).<sup>126</sup> Hunkel concluded, “Siegfried’s birth in us—that is our solstice-prayer!”<sup>127</sup>

<sup>122</sup>Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 104–5.

<sup>123</sup>See, e.g., the anti-Catholic article “Der gefährliche Nationalismus” in VB-12 (Feb. 8, 1921); cf. Anton Drexler, “Dürfen Sozialisten Judengegner sein?” in VB-46 (June 12, 1921). Drexler argued that Jesus was the “first Socialist” and the “first active antisemite.” In January 1921 the VB also recommended five new publications to its readers, three of which dealt with religion and advocated either a pagan-Christian blend or paganism outright: Döllinger’s *Baldur and the Bible*, Wälsung’s *Was Jesus a Jew?*, and Emil Tetzlaff’s *The Sermon on the Mount and the Teaching of the Edda*; see VB-4 (Jan. 13, 1921).

<sup>124</sup>*Der Nationalsozialist* (hereafter NS) 2/3 (July 3, 1921). In the same edition Drexler attacked “the Bible” (specifically the Old Testament) as a Jewish book in an article entitled “Bibel und Politik.” The VB was published as *Der Nationalsozialist* from June 26 to July 21.

<sup>125</sup>NS-2/3 (July 3, 1921).

<sup>126</sup>The battle of Hermann (Arminius) against the Romans in the Teutoburg forest was a significant part of German nationalist tradition; see George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 58–62.

<sup>127</sup>NS-2/3 (July 3, 1921). On Donnershag and the “German Faith Community,” see *Handbuch zur “Völkischen Bewegung”. 1871–1918*, 265, 407; *Völkisch-religiöse Bewegung*, esp. 19–21, 26; Steiger, *Katholizismus und Judentum*, 91–100.

By December 1922, Margart Hunkel's book *Von deutscher Gottesmuttertschaft*, the fifth book in a series on "German Faith," was being recommended as an appropriate "Christmas present" by the *Völkischer Beobachter* bookshop, i.e., the bookshop that was run by the *Völkischer Beobachter* from its offices.<sup>128</sup> Margart Hunkel claimed that Christmas was the "night of the winter solstice" and a "great mother-night of the light," bearing "the divine sun-hero"; she even equated Christmas-tree ornaments with "sacred runes" that symbolized "rebirth."<sup>129</sup> The official Nazi newspaper promoted paganism and pagan communities as part of the same movement to which the Nazi Party belonged. This was something that could hardly be missed by readers, given that news of the NSDAP solstice celebration and of Donnershag appeared alongside each other in *The National Socialist*. In fact, the Nazi Christmas of 1921 (actually held on January 9, 1922) was openly advertised as the celebration of pagan solstice:

The celebration of Christmas represents the most German of all celebrations. Through it our people have, since time immemorial, celebrated the great turning point in the annual cycle, the day on which the sun begins once more to constantly expand the height of its orbit in the sky, the day on which, in the midst of winter, the soul of the people is awakened once more by the yearning for a new spring.<sup>130</sup>

Like the Nazis' summer solstice celebration of 1921 (and 1922), part of the point was that the changing seasons stood as a metaphor for the Nazis' much sought-after "resurrection of our people": "This breakthrough will come roaring in like spring and destroy everything that stands in its way."<sup>131</sup>

The second Nazi Christmas event was a celebration of Germany rather than a commemoration of the birth of Christ. Music and songs by German composers were performed, including pieces by Richard Wagner.<sup>132</sup> Hitler gave a "Yule speech" and offered an interpretation of an "Aryan" Jesus that contrasted German "idealism" with Jewish "materialism." According to the report in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, Hitler "outlined for us Germans the sense of the German Christmas festival (*Weihnachtsfest*): in the birth of this solitary spiritual colossus in a stable, two worldviews collided with one another, between which there can never be a reconciliation, a 'compromise'. . . the mammonistic-materialist

<sup>128</sup>VB-100 (Dec. 16, 1922); Margart Hunkel, *Von deutscher Gottesmuttertschaft* (Sontra in Hessen: Verlag Jungborn, 1919). The title, which is difficult to translate, literally means *On German Mother-of-God-hood*. It was advertised alongside such staples as Dinter's *Sin against the Blood*.

<sup>129</sup>Hunkel, *Von deutscher Gottesmuttertschaft*, 20.

<sup>130</sup>Mühlberger, *Hitler's Voice*, 1, 84–85.

<sup>131</sup>*Ibid.*, 85. See also the front-page advertisement and report on summer solstice in VB-50 (June 24, 1922) and VB-51 (June 28, 1922).

<sup>132</sup>The pieces from Wagner included the bridal chorus from *Lohengrin*, as well as the "magic thunderstorm" (*Gewitterzauber*) and the "entrance of the gods into Valhalla" from *Rheingold*. There were also musical pieces from Beethoven, Schubert, and Handel; see VB-3 (Jan. 11, 1922); VB-4 (Jan. 14, 1922).

worldview and idealism.” He went on to argue that if “idealism” died out, so would the Volk. “Idealism” had built up “peoples and states,” he added. He also warned that where “the spirit of materialism, brought in through the Jewish race, spreads itself widely, there beg[ins] the descent and downfall.” of the Volk. Hitler argued that Germany had succumbed to the materialist spirit, but believed that “the *Yule festival*, the *German festival*” proved that “Idealism” could “again become a flame that ignites all German hearts, so that they do away with the plague of egoism, with the Jewish-mammonistic spirit of usury, and with this race itself.” The *Völkischer Beobachter* report concluded that Hitler had “planted the banner of *faith*, [faith] in Germany’s revival.”<sup>133</sup>

By 1922, the Nazi Christmas celebration was being described publicly as both a pagan and a Christian event. Hitler suggested that Germany’s servitude may have been “necessary for an inner moral rebirth.” He spoke of “the man, whose birthday we celebrate today,” as one who “took up the relentless struggle against the domination of evil that erodes us,” adding: “It is not throwing off the outer force that will make us free, but rather, first of all, the inner purging. . . . Money rules the world, it is said. But a hero was born poor, and demolished an entire world.” Hitler’s main point was that the same “heroic spirit” of those who died in World War I was required of postwar German youth in order to achieve “the cleansing of our Volk within.” He closed with this admonition: “We do not wish to be Christians only in word, but also Christians of deed, of the sword. Battle the materialistic plague, fight for ideals!” This reference to the “materialistic plague” meant the Jews: “Already 1,900 years ago, the world was infected by the Jews and the Jewish spirit exactly as it is today, and when Christ rebelled against the huckster spirit, they nailed him to the cross.”<sup>134</sup>

In the months prior to this, Hitler had made statements that have some bearing on his speech. They indicate that he was open to esoteric strands of völkisch-religious thought, and they demonstrate that he viewed “Christ” as a violent anti-semite. In November, Hitler had argued that if “Christ went through the world today, he would say: ‘You should not *learn* from the Jews, you should *deny* them.’” Relying on the story of Jesus driving the money changers from the Temple, Hitler expressed his “Christian attitude” toward the Jews: “The means change over the course of time. What today is a blackjack was earlier a whip.”

<sup>133</sup>VB-3 (Jan. 11, 1922). There was a prevailing notion in the völkisch movement that the “German spirit” was “idealistic,” whereas the “Jewish spirit” was “materialistic”; see Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 50. See also Koehne, “Reassessing *The Holy Reich*,” 441–45. This was openly acknowledged by writers like Hellmuth von Gerlach, who had been heavily involved in the German antisemitic movement in the late nineteenth century. Gerlach eventually changed his views and wrote in his 1937 autobiography that he had been cured of his “delusions about idealism as an Aryan monopoly and materialism as a Semitic stigma”; see the document “Hellmuth von Gerlach on Leading Antisemites and their Agitation,” translated by Erwin Fink, available through <http://germanhistory-docs.ghi-dc.org>.

<sup>134</sup>See the various reports in Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 769–70.

In a speech delivered on December 4, he argued that Christianity was racially specific: "The Christian religion is created only for the Aryans; for other peoples it is absurd." Shortly thereafter, he argued that "positive Christianity" meant "the sword with its grip in the shape of a cross," not the religion that "asked one to turn the other cheek."<sup>135</sup> These statements were in line with the *völkisch* notion of an "Aryan Jesus." But they went beyond this. Hitler's interpretation ultimately created a "Nazi Jesus": a man whose views were supposedly in accord with the Nazis, and who had also been engaged in an antisemitic crusade.

At the same time, other prominent members of the Nazi Party—like Alfred Rosenberg—were conflating paganism and Christianity. Rosenberg published an article in the same issue of the *Völkischer Beobachter* that contained reports on the Yule festival of December 17, 1922. This meant that Hitler's views on the "Nazi Jesus" appeared concurrently with Rosenberg's argument that Christmas was

a unification of the ancient and the new: the Yule-tide of our ancestors who lived in tune with nature, who greeted the coming light out of the night [of winter], and the day of remembrance of the birth of Jesus Christ as a day that signifies religious fulfilment for millions of our forefathers and current Volk-comrades. In this spirit we National Socialists celebrate Christmas: in the sign of the interconnection (*Verbundensein*) of the cross with the swastika.<sup>136</sup>

Rosenberg's article openly portrayed the swastika as a pagan symbol linked to Germanic Yule traditions. He argued that the cross did not represent the crucifix upon which Christ had died—which, in his opinion, was a T-shape—but was instead a simplification of the swastika. The "cross as such" was therefore "an ancient symbol of salvation and of the sun (*Heils- und Sonnensymbol*)."<sup>137</sup> Rosenberg's explanation was that the "sun-wheel" had been simplified into the form of the cross and adopted by early Christians. This claim—that the Christians were still using the cross/swastika as a sun-wheel—conflated Christian belief and Nazism (cross and swastika), on the one hand, while undercutting Christianity as a religion, on the other. Christianity was seen not as a unique faith system, but rather as a part of—and a continuation of—older Aryan concepts of sun-worship. Rosenberg even argued that the Chi-Rho was "originally the sign of the Egyptian son of god, Horus."<sup>137</sup> The Chi-Rho is a

<sup>135</sup>Speeches of Nov. 2, Dec. 4, and Dec. 8, 1922, in Hitler, *Aufzeichnungen*, 720, 754, 756.

<sup>136</sup>VB-101 (Dec. 20, 1922).

<sup>137</sup>VB-101 (Dec. 20, 1922). In this last argument, Rosenberg was following his hero Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who himself had followed Flinders Petrie; see Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 2, 28–29; W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Religion and Conscience in Ancient Egypt: Lectures Delivered at University College* (London: Methuen, 1898), 45–47. Rosenberg's other argument was that because the swastika appeared on older Christian churches and monuments, it should not be rejected as pagan. He borrowed directly from Jörg Lechler, even following him point for point;

traditional Christian symbol formed from the first two Greek letters for “Christ” (χρ), and was interpreted in some strange ways by völkisch writers.<sup>138</sup>

The pagan aspect of the Nazi Christmas helps explain why Ernst Freiherr von Wolzogen was a prominent participant at the event held on December 17, 1922, where he read “German poems” and a *Hakenkreuzlermarsch* (“march for those who bear the swastika”) to those in attendance.<sup>139</sup> An opponent of Christianity and a well-known advocate of a pagan “German Faith,” Wolzogen was, according to Uwe Puschner, one of the most important figures involved in the “non-Christian wing” of the “völkisch-religious movement.”<sup>140</sup> As Wolzogen declared in the foreword to his *Guide to German Faith*, he had changed his original title, *Small Catechism of German Faith*, because he wished to ensure that “we adherents of the German Faith” were not connected to the church in any way. He even encouraged Germans to leave their churches, saw Christianity as one of the “Asiatic religions,” and believed that “Christianity and Germanness (*Deutschtum*) are eternally irreconcilable opposites.” To his mind, this clash was rooted in Christianity’s focus on the hereafter (*Jenseit*) rather than on this world (*Diesseit*), and in the long-standing Christian commitment to the defense of the weak and the ill, which Wolzogen believed was contrary to true German Faith.<sup>141</sup> Yet, when describing annual festivals for the neo-pagans, Wolzogen began with Christmas (*Weihnacht oder Julfest*) and Easter (*Osterfest*). The former represented “the highest festival of joy about the rebirth of the light out of the long winter-night.” Wolzogen also promoted the commemoration “of the nights of the spirits of the Wild Hunt”—a pagan myth referring to “the ghostly riders who ride through the storms at the head of a ghostly army during the Twelve Nights of Yuletide”—as well as the “battles of Thor” with the ice giants.<sup>142</sup> The celebration of Christmas as *Weihnacht*, then, provides no clear indication of the religious faith of those involved in the völkisch movement. Moreover, the fact that such a prominent advocate for neo-pagan German Faith was invited to participate in the Nazi Christmas meant that the NSDAP was not dissociating itself from pagan strands of the völkisch movement.

Hastings has argued that, by 1923, there was a strong “membership drive” in the party that targeted Christians. In his view, this was why the *Völkischer Beobachter* moved from publishing information solely about entertainment (e.g., theatre schedules and sporting events) to full lists of Catholic, Old

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see Jörg Lechler, *Vom Hakenkreuz. Die Geschichte eines Symbols*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Curt Kabitzsch, 1921), 25–26.

<sup>138</sup> See Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 158.

<sup>139</sup> The *Hakenkreuzlermarsch* was published in the same issue. See VB-101 (Dec. 20, 1922).

<sup>140</sup> Puschner, “Weltanschauung und Religion, Religion und Weltanschauung,” 24.

<sup>141</sup> Wolzogen, *Wegweiser zu deutschem Glauben*, 16, 29.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–34. Wolzogen supported Easter as a pagan celebration dedicated to Ostara, “goddess of youth and the first Spring.” For the quote about the “Wild Hunt,” see Simek, *Northern Mythology*, 372.

Catholic, and Protestant church service times in Munich.<sup>143</sup> Nonetheless, the call to battle issued in the *Völkischer Beobachter* for the Munich Putsch of November 9, 1923, still ranged from “Germanic” Christianity to paganism and featured concepts derived from Madame Blavatsky and popularized by Theodor Fritsch:

The horrific Marxist episode, this devilish product, the result of the crossing of Talmudic spirit and materialistic insanity, vanishes before the Christian-Germanic worldview, which, in one quick movement, breaks the chains that had been forged when darkness ruled. The eternal struggle between Ormuzd and Ahriman, between light and darkness, has once again ended in the victory of the sun, whose symbol is the ancient Aryan sign of salvation: the swastika!<sup>144</sup>

### Conclusion

The foregoing examination of Nazi Christmas celebrations and early views on religion in the party leads to three major conclusions. The first is that there was no cohesive meaning to “positive Christianity.” There were, undoubtedly, leading Nazis who considered themselves Christians, as well as with Christians who were wholeheartedly Nazis.<sup>145</sup> Yet, it is equally clear that the Nazi Party embraced views from the outset that ranged from paganism to some kind of Aryan Christian belief. For a “positive Christian” party to promote and report its own Christmas celebrations as the Germanic pagan festival of winter solstice is revelatory. It not only showed a lack of concern about just how Christian they appeared, but also demonstrated the spectrum of religious views within the party.

Despite having nominally declared themselves for “a positive Christianity,” Nazi Party members adhered, in practice, to a wide range of beliefs and views that were expressed publicly and prominently—including in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, which was under Nazi control from December 1920. The concept of an Aryan Jesus intermingled with the ideas of Guido von List and Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, Theodor Fritsch, and Artur Dinter. Not even German Faith advocates were excluded from the NSDAP. The Nazis’ official newspaper wrote about their ideas, recommended their books, and reported on their ceremonies.

Second, the early Nazi Party was immersed in the völkisch movement, including its pagan trends and traditions. As this article demonstrates, the party promoted the ideas of Liebenfels, List, Dinter, and Fritsch, which suggests the need for a more thorough consideration of the manner in which major writers and guiding concepts from the völkisch movement were blended into Nazi ideology.

<sup>143</sup>VB-80 (April 29/30, 1923); Hastings, “How ‘Catholic’ Was the Early Nazi Movement?,” 403.

<sup>144</sup>Mühlberger, *Hitler’s Voice*, 1, 90. This was a special edition of the *Völkischer Beobachter*. Döllinger had expressed remarkably similar sentiments about World War I; see Döllinger, *Baldur und Bibel*, 182.

<sup>145</sup>See, e.g., Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*; Spicer, *Hitler’s Priests*; Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

This is especially important given the third major conclusion: that we cannot assume an inherent dichotomy within the Nazi Party between those adhering to paganism and those adhering to Aryan Christianity. Nor can we assume that references to Jesus Christ, Christianity, or the Bible necessarily excluded paganism.

The distinctive interpretations offered in the *völkisch* milieu (including those made by Nazi advocates) meant, first, that Jesus Christ and the deity that he worshipped could become Baldur or some form of “light-god”; second, that the Bible might be seen as a corrupted version of the *Edda*; and third, that the cross could be viewed as a sun-wheel. Simply put, the Nazi Party was a *völkisch* party at its founding, and the range of religious views held by its members was indicative of this. A failure to locate the Nazi Party within the *völkisch* movement as a whole fosters ignorance of some of the most significant and foundational influences on the NSDAP. One of the major challenges still facing historians is the identification of dominant trends from the earlier *völkisch* movement that fed into the Nazi movement. It appears that one major point of continuity was the notion that race ultimately defined religiosity, thus determining one’s capacity for religion.<sup>146</sup>

These conclusions have significant implications for the longer history of the Nazi Party. Chief among them is that positive Christianity was featured in the Nazi Program of 1920 for political ends, rather than as a declaration of support for a particular form of faith. It was politically useful to assert that the Nazi Party supported a positive Christianity, but the claim fell flat because of the diverse range of views embraced by party members. Another important implication concerns the issue of continuity.<sup>147</sup> Nazi leaders continued to hold a wide range of religious views after 1923, and the Nazis certainly did not change their ideas about Christmas. Solstice was revived as a celebration (particularly within the Hitler Youth) when the Nazis came to power, and Christmas was increasingly portrayed as a “Germanic” festival. In conjunction with this, the Nazis established their own rites and myths in what has been characterized as a “political religion.”<sup>148</sup>

<sup>146</sup>This was not limited by religious form, but relied on a broader assumption that Aryans were “spiritual” or “moral,” whereas Jews were not. See Samuel Koehne, “The Racial Yardstick: ‘Ethnotheism’ and Official Nazi Views on Religion,” *German Studies Review* 37, no. 3 (2014): 575–96.

<sup>147</sup>It should be noted that the NSDAP was not loathe to attack other *völkisch* groups, however: see Puschner and Vollnhals, *Völkisch-religiöse Bewegung*.

<sup>148</sup>Gajek notes the role that folklorists played in reinterpreting Christmas as a “Yule festival” or a specifically “German” festival. See Gajek, “Christmas under the Third Reich”; Perry, “Nazifying Christmas.” On the creation of new myths and a “political religion,” see, e.g., Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden. Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole 1923 bis 1945* (Vierow: SH-Verlag, 1996); Hans Maier, ed., *Totalitarianism and Political Religions* (London: Routledge, 2004); Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, from the Great War to the War on Terror* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), 94–115, 122.



Richard Steigmann-Gall has argued for a dichotomy between positive Christians and paganists—one that moved from the ascendancy of an Aryanized Christianity in the early 1930s to the dominance of “paganists” and anti-Christians by 1939. Hastings, by contrast, has advanced the notion of a “Catholic inflection” up to 1923, with an increasingly anti-Catholic and anti-Christian orientation after the Munich Putsch.<sup>149</sup> This article instead makes the case that, from its inception, the Nazi Party included those who advocated paganism, Aryanized Christianity, and a full range of views in between. Neo-paganists and advocates for a Germanic Faith were certainly not excluded from the early party. Furthermore, pagan völkisch ideas and anti-Christian views continued to inform Nazi thought through 1945, as statements by prominent leaders such as Heinrich Himmler, Martin Bormann, and Adolf Hitler suggest.<sup>150</sup> The fact that such ideas were present from the foundational years may help to explain their endurance.

In fact, religion remained an open question for the Nazis, and völkisch views on religion were explicitly promoted in works such as Alfred Rosenberg’s 1930 book *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*. Rosenberg’s place in the Nazi hierarchy, as well as the influence of this specific text, are a subject of debate. Yet, when the Nazis came to power, *Myth* was considered, “next to *Mein Kampf*, the leading book on National Socialist philosophy.”<sup>151</sup> It caused enormous controversy and was attacked by the major churches. Rosenberg championed the notion of the “racial soul,” the blending of “Germanic” Faith with Christianity, and even the possibility that “Aryans” hailed from the fabled lost continent of Atlantis.<sup>152</sup> This argument was prominent in works such as Karl Georg Zschaetzsch’s *Origins and History of the Aryan Race*, which was advertised in the *Völkischer Beobachter* in 1921.<sup>153</sup>

Rosenberg sought to develop a “myth of the blood” and a religion that would match the “Nordic racial soul.” While he acknowledged that German Faith

<sup>149</sup>Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 259–60; Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 155–76.

<sup>150</sup>Hastings argues that there was “little or no room within the Nazi ideological universe for any ‘genuine’... Catholic or Christian substance during Hitler’s tenure in power”; see Hastings, *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism*, 182.

<sup>151</sup>Hajo Holborn, “National Socialism in Germany: A Short Bibliography,” *International Affairs* 13 (1934): 96. See Steigmann-Gall, *Holy Reich*, 92; Ernst Piper, “Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 1 (January 2007): 57. It was assigned as a school text by April 1933; see Robert Cecil, *The Myth of the Master Race: Alfred Rosenberg and Nazi Ideology* (London: Batsford, 1972), 103.

<sup>152</sup>Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1935), 24–28 (“Atlantis”), 21–144 (“Race and the Racial Soul”).

<sup>153</sup>VB-95 (Dec. 14, 1921). Meyer had reviewed *Herkunft und Geschichte des arischen Stammes* and praised it for its use of the *Edda* and its exploration of the idea that the Aryans had come from Atlantis; see VB-101 (Nov. 21, 1920). Zschaetzsch later published *Atlantis, die Urheimat der Arier* (Berlin: Arier-Verlag, 1922). Both he and Weinländer/Wieland influenced Liebenfels; see Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 209, 262n1.

advocates had not developed a coherent religious system, he believed their research “in the field of Nordic religious history” would “form the yeast that will permeate the former Catholic and former Lutheran components of the German Church. Then the Nordic sagas and fairy tales will take the place of the Old Testament stories of pimps and cattle dealers.”<sup>154</sup> If Rosenberg’s book embodied the völkisch-religious roots of Nazism, then the churches under the Nazi regime were also engaged in a battle of “worldviews.”<sup>155</sup> A remarkable degree of continuity also existed between the early religious views of the NSDAP and the German Christian Movement, a völkisch Christian organisation that arose in the Protestant churches. As scholars such as Doris Bergen and Susannah Heschel have argued, members of this movement were willing to embrace völkisch ideas and freely blend them with Christian beliefs.<sup>156</sup>

One final consequence of the foregoing arguments is the need for greater specificity. It is not sufficient to talk of Nazism and religion—or Nazism and Christianity—without asking where such views fell on the spectrum of belief. Were Nazi leaders and party members consciously relying on existing strands of liberal Christian theology (as some German Christians were), or on strands of esoteric völkisch thought? Did they believe the Israelites were Jews or Aryans? Was their Jesus seen as Baldur, or as the Christ of established Christian doctrine? Or was he always just the “Nazi Jesus”—a reflection of their own anti-semitic concerns? In short, this article calls for the adoption of a more heterogeneous approach in order to understand the full complexity of the historical situation—including aspects that have been ignored, like Aryan Israelites and a pagan Christianity. There was only one point that all leading Nazis appear to have agreed on: that religion had to measure up to their hyperracialized and anti-semitic ideology.

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<sup>154</sup>Rosenberg, *Mythus*, 613–14.

<sup>155</sup>Raimund Baumgärtner, *Weltanschauungskampf im Dritten Reich. Die Auseinandersetzung der Kirchen mit Alfred Rosenberg* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1977).

<sup>156</sup>Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*. See also John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933–1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), 10–13, 45–60.